

9

The Significance of the Revolution

A Revolution which had begun in 1789 with boundless hopes for a golden era of political liberty and social change had ended in 1799 with a military seizure of power. It had not proved possible to stabilize the Revolution after the initial overthrow of the *ancien régime* and the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in August 1789. Instead, French people had had to endure a decade of political instability, civil war, and armed conflict with the rest of Europe.

In 1889, on the centenary of the French Revolution, Samuel Langhorne Clemens—the author, as Mark Twain, of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—published *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. The sprightly novel imagines the visit by a nineteenth-century American to sixth-century Britain as a way of evaluating human progress and includes a ringing justification of the French Revolution and the Terror:

There were two 'Reigns of Terror', if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions; but our shudders are all for the horrors of the minor Terror.¹

Of course, any judgement about whether the French Revolution was, on balance, beneficial to humanity must be more nuanced than Twain's. There is no doubt that the 300,000 nobles and clergy would have judged these years to have been disastrous in every way. So, too, would have those who had been dependent on the privileged for employment or for charity, and the families of scores of thousands of

young men whose lives had ended prematurely on battlefields or in hospitals. Had they died in vain? Too many discussions of the consequences of the Revolution have in fact been reduced to personal judgements about whether or not it was 'a good thing'. This is not the same as evaluating its consequences for the world in which French people lived. How 'revolutionary' had been the experience of twenty-five years of Revolution and Empire?

Responses to these questions go to the heart of important and often trenchant divisions among historians. Ever since the Revolution itself, most historians have argued that, for better or for worse, the Revolution profoundly altered most aspects of life in France. However, in recent decades, some historians have argued that its consequences were minimal in terms of real social change. François Furet, for example, argues that well into the nineteenth century French society remained much as it had under the *ancien régime*.² Until France went through its own industrial revolution from the 1830s, so his argument goes, the patterns of work and daily life would be much the same as before the Revolution.

Certainly, such 'minimalist' historians agree with their opponents that French political life had been fundamentally transformed. For the first time, a large and populous country had been reformed along democratic, republican lines. Even the restoration of monarchy in 1814 could not reverse the revolutionary change from royal absolutism to constitutional, representative government. Moreover, the experience of years of political debate, election campaigns and new political rights meant that the idea of citizenship was now deeply ingrained. Such new ideas had been spread by word of mouth, the printed word, and imagery, part of what may be described as a revolution in 'political culture'. The years of liberty after 1788 unleashed an unprecedented outpouring of the printed word: hundreds of newspapers, perhaps one thousand plays, and many thousands of brochures and handbills. But this revolution of ideas went far beyond this, for such printed material was accompanied by a flowering of popular revolutionary art in the form of woodcuts, prints and paintings. Millions of people had become accustomed to the assumption that any form of government could only be legitimate if it was based on some form of popular sovereignty. Malcolm Crook has estimated that about three million men

had been involved in voting across the revolutionary decade; indeed, there were so many elections (several per year), and such lengthy voting procedures, that a certain lassitude developed. The Constitution of 1793 made provision for direct elections, but this was never implemented.

Historians also agree about the ideological importance of the Revolution. Twenty-five years of political upheaval and division left a legacy of memories, both bitter and sweet, and of conflicting ideologies which has lasted until our own times. The Revolution was a rich seed-bed of ideologies ranging from communism to authoritarian royalism via liberal constitutionalism and social democracy. French people were to remain divided about which political system was best able to reconcile authority, liberty, and equality. Should the head of government be a king, an emperor or an elected executive? Should 'liberty' mean political and civic freedoms or economic freedom (a free enterprise economy) as well? And how was 'equality' to be understood: as equality before the law, of political rights, of social status, of economic well-being, of the races, of the sexes? Such questions were at the heart of political and social divisions during the Revolution; they remain unresolved today.

None of the ideologies which developed during the Revolution could claim to represent the views of a majority of French people. While Bonapartism and Jacobinism claimed to be based on popular sovereignty, both were ambiguous about the forms that democratic government should take. The memory of Napoleon would cast a long shadow of the strong man who had restored order and stability but at the cost of military rule and almost continuous war. The period of Jacobin rule remained attractive in hindsight for its emphasis on democracy and social equality and its heroic defence of the Revolution in 1793–4, but also conjured up negative images of the Terror and controls on civil liberties. In areas of the south with significant Protestant populations the deadly political divisions of 1793–5 had often followed denominational lines, leaving a legacy of hatred which henceforth ensured that Protestants would support left-wing, secular political parties. A century later, a Protestant rural labourer, Jean Fontane from Anduze (department of the Gard), recalled that, 'if a majority of us were republicans, it was in memory of our beautiful Revolution of 1793, of which our fathers had inculcated the

principles which still survive in our hearts. Above all, we were children of the Revolution.³

In contrast, there would always be large numbers of people for whom the memory of the Revolution evoked negative images of suffering and horror. The many liberal nobles and the great mass of parish priests who had thrown in their lot with the Third Estate in 1789 had experienced a protracted nightmare as the Revolution abolished noble privileges and titles and made sweeping changes to the Church. Most of the clerical deputies had arrived at the Estates-General of 1789 critical of both the monarchy and their own bishops and eager to participate in a project of regenerating the country. Their hopes had been dashed by more radical reform agendas for the Church, culminating in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The involvement—whether active or complicit—of non-juring clergy in the counter-revolution and the subsequent proscription and dechristianization during the Terror was to reunite Church and monarchy in a royalist ideology of the Right, one of the major political movements in France for the next 150 years.

Memories of the Terror and of mass conscription and war were etched deep into the memories of every individual and community. In the west, where the civil war in the Vendée had cost perhaps 400,000 lives, there was general rejection of republicanism for a century or more. In the village of Chanzeaux, for example, the church built on the ruins of the old in the nineteenth century features stained glass windows listing the names of the dead of 1793 and visual images which have taught generations of villagers until this day that the rising was one of devout peasants defending beloved priests. Similarly, the discovery of masses of bones in Lucs-Vendée by the parish priest in 1860 was to result in another myth, still potent today, of the 'Bethlehem of the Vendée', according to which 564 women, 107 children and many men were massacred on a single day, on 28 February 1794. In 1804, La Roche-sur-Yon, destroyed by Jacobin armies in 1794 was rebuilt as Napoléonville. The town was ordered around three major open spaces: for the market, in front of the Prefecture, and for troop reviews.⁴ There is perhaps no better statement of the values underpinning the Napoleonic vision of social order in post-revolutionary France; his conquest of space could not, however, obliterate memories of its earlier role at the heart of the Vendéan

rebellion. Two hundred years later, the insurrection remains the central element in the collective identity of the people of the west of France.

Whatever the importance of these changes to government, political ideas and memories, however, 'minimalists' have argued that the essentials of daily life continued largely unchanged: especially patterns of work, the position of the poor, social inequalities, and the inferior status of women.

First, the great mass of working people in town and country continued to work and survive in the same ways as they had before 1789. Most French people remained, like their parents, owners or renters of small plots of land. The abolition of seigneurial dues, finally achieved by reforms in 1792-3, and the purchase of the smaller pieces of church and *émigré* property made it possible for millions of peasant landowners to stay on the land. France remained essentially a rural society dominated by small farm units on which households used ancient methods and techniques to produce mainly for their own survival. In urban areas, too, most work continued to be done in small workplaces, where master craftsmen worked side by side with three or four skilled workers and apprentices. Many decades would pass before a substantial minority of wage-earners were employed in large, mechanized workshops of the type starting to become common in the new industrial cities in the north of England.

Secondly, whatever the grand schemes of the Jacobins in 1793-4, the destitute continued to constitute a major urban and rural underclass swollen in times of crisis by unemployed rural labourers and urban workers. The position of the poor had always been appalling, dependent as they were on haphazard and often inadequate relief from the Church. But worse was to come. In 1791, the National Assembly had removed the Church's capacity to dispense charity when it abolished the tithe and sold off church property. The subsequent realization that local government could simply not cope with poor relief led governments to set up a series of work schemes and temporary relief measures which were always piecemeal and never adequately financed by governments preoccupied with war. After 1794 the situation of the poor became truly desperate, as conservative governments abolished controls on prices and the Jacobins' social welfare measures. This coincided with several poor harvests and

harsh winters. In the winter of 1795–6 the river Seine froze solid and ravenous wolves were reported roaming the streets of Paris among the bodies of the destitute who had died of hunger. Even when the Catholic Church was restored to its position as religion of state by Napoleon, it never again had the material resources to minister to the needs of the poor even in the limited way it had before 1789.

Among the initial supporters of the Revolution, perhaps urban working people had sacrificed most and gained least. The *sans-culottes* of Paris, Marseilles and other cities had been the backbone of the Revolution, but they won few tangible benefits. Their demands in 1793 for property redistribution failed to achieve results; in contrast, a major grievance in 1789, indirect taxation, had been reintroduced and customs houses ringing cities and towns had been re-erected. To be sure, moments of popular power and hope left potent traces in the collective memories of the descendants of *sans-culottes* and sections of the peasantry. Even so, it could be argued that, for working people, fond memories of 1792–4 were to be cold comfort for dashed expectations of real social change. The descendants of the radicals of the 1790s had to wait many decades for the realization of such hopes: until 1848 for the durable implementation of manhood suffrage (for women not until 1944), until 1864 for the right to strike and twenty years more for the right to form trade unions, until the 1880s for free, secular, and compulsory education, and until well into the twentieth century for an income tax and social welfare provisions for the sick, the elderly, and the unemployed.

Thirdly, France remained a sharply inegalitarian, hierarchical society, even if the new hierarchy was to be one in which wealth rather than the family name was seen as the best gauge of personal merit. Many of the battles of the revolutionary period were fought over the question of what 'equality' should mean in practice, but the campaigns of the *sans-culottes* and poorer peasants for concrete measures to reduce economic inequalities were ultimately unsuccessful. The constitution of 1793 had been the first to codify public responsibilities for social welfare and education, but it had never been put into effect.

In the colonies, too, the pre-revolutionary hierarchies of race were reimposed, with one exception. In January 1802, 12,000 French troops landed in St-Domingue to reimpose colonial control; after two

years of bloody fighting the first post-colonial black nation—Haiti—was born. Elsewhere, however, Napoleon reversed the Jacobin abolition of slavery in 1794 and in 1802 reintroduced the 'Code noir' of 1685, which denied slaves legal recourse and assumed their children to be the slave-owner's property. The slave trade would not be abolished until 1815–18; slavery itself not until 1848.

Moreover, in the new hierarchy of wealth which was to rule the country after 1799, most *ancien régime* nobles continued to be pre-eminent. According to Donald Greer, 13,925 male nobles over 12 years of age had emigrated; in all, 1,158 noble men and women were executed during the Terror. Historians now argue that there were perhaps only 125,000 nobles in the 1780s, many fewer than previously estimated. Consequently, virtually every noble family was directly affected by emigration, imprisonment or death. Even so, it is clear that the Revolution was not a holocaust of nobles. Those nobles who steered clear of political trouble and kept their lands intact during the Revolution could continue to play a leading economic and political role into the nineteenth century. Of the 281 men Napoleon appointed as his 'prefects' to administer the provinces, 41 per cent were drawn from old noble families. In 1830, two-thirds of the 387 richest men in France were nobles; and, as late as 1846, 25 per cent of parliamentary deputies were nobles from *ancien régime* families.

On 28 Pluviôse An VIII (16 February 1800), just three months after seizing power, Napoleon issued a new administrative decree which effectively reduced local government to a rubber stamp. Henceforth councils were to restrict themselves to the management of communal finances and resources within rigid formulae of administration. The mayors and deputy-mayors of towns with more than 5,000 people were to be directly appointed by the first Consul, while others were to be named by the prefect of the department. In this way prefects had the powers of the pre-revolutionary *intendants*, and local councils, elected for twenty years on a property qualification, were decidedly less democratic and unfettered than ever before. Judges, too, were once again to be appointed rather than elected.

Finally, 'minimalists' argue that the inferior status of women emerged little changed, or even more entrenched. Women had always been the linchpin of the fragile family economy and, as such, had injected an extraordinary strength and hope into the early years of

the Revolution. But, as women, they seem to have gained little: only the right to inherit equally with their brothers and to sign legal contracts, if they were unmarried, survived the Empire. The liberal 1792 divorce laws, used by perhaps 30,000 women, were sharply curtailed in 1804 by Napoleon and finally abolished altogether in 1816. Despite the energetic campaigns of individual feminists in the early years of the Revolution, the repeated intervention of working women in collective action in Paris and their presence in clubs and societies, the great majority of politicians of whatever type were firmly opposed to women's political rights. During the Terror, the government newspaper, *La Feuille du salut public*, asked:

Women, do you wish to be republicans? Love, follow and teach the laws which recall your husbands and your children to the exercise of their rights . . . never follow the popular assemblies with the desire of speaking there.

Indeed, the strength of the political challenge women represented may be gauged by the often violent attacks upon them. Politicians ranging from royalists to Napoleon would have agreed with the Jacobin Amar, of the Committee of General Security, who justified the banning of the militant women's organization, the Revolutionary Republican Citizenesses, to the Convention on 30 October 1793 by describing men as

strong, robust, born with great energy, audacity and courage . . . destined for agriculture, commerce, navigation, travel, war . . . he alone seems suited for serious, deep thought . . . Women are unsuited for advanced thinking and serious reflection . . . more exposed to error and an exultation which would be disastrous in public life.⁵

The ambiguities in men's attitudes to women—drawing on ingrained assumptions about 'women's nature'—are also evident in revolutionary iconography: the protective Virgin Mary of *ancien régime* imagery gave way to the Marianne of the Republic, now in classical garb and liberty cap, but still a feminine allegory watching protectively but passively over active men. Lynn Hunt has argued that despite, or because of, the political challenge of radical women, the transition from absolutism—under which all were subjects of the king—to a republican fraternity of male citizens had in fact reinforced the subordinate political position of women.

The implication of this 'minimalist' view of the significance of the Revolution is that those few changes it made to French politics and society were simply not worth the cost. The fatal legacy of the Revolution according to Simon Schama was the violent and naive certainty that 'connected social distress with political change'; the great mistake of Louis XVI had been to ask the masses for their *cahiers de doléances* at a time of famine and political uncertainty. From that point, the Revolution was 'doomed to self-destruct from over-inflated expectations'. For Schama, the only significant social change was the death of the innocent at the hands of unscrupulous demagogues and brutish mobs.⁶

Other historians, such as Albert Soboul and Gwynne Lewis, have argued that the Revolution was profoundly transforming. While they recognize that there were important continuities in French society, they insist that the 'minimalists' have ignored other important consequences. To Soboul, the 'minimalist' perspective was born of a political antipathy to the possibilities of revolutionary transformation: 'the vain attempts to deny the French Revolution—that dangerous precedent—its historical reality'. For Soboul, the Revolution was profoundly revolutionary in its short and long-term outcomes: 'A classic bourgeois revolution, its uncompromising abolition of the feudal system and the seigneurial regime make it the starting-point for capitalist society and the liberal representative system in the history of France.'⁷

These 'maximalist' historians argue that the Revolution was a triumph for the bourgeoisie and for the landowning peasantry. Moreover, the Revolution transformed the institutional structures of France—indeed, the very meaning of 'France' itself. It also led to lasting changes to the nature of the Church and of the family.

The Revolution represented an abrupt change in cultural and institutional structures of identity. France in 1789 had been a society in which people's main allegiance had been to their particular region: France had a unity only because of the monarchy's claim that this was its territory and the people its subjects. Most people did not use the French language in daily life and looked to elites in provincial capitals such as Toulouse, Rennes and Grenoble to defend them against the increasing claims of the royal state for taxes and conscripts. The strength of local loyalties was reinforced by economic practices which

sought to meet the needs of the household and exchanged produce mainly within local markets. Since the twelfth century, the cost to the monarchy of establishing territorial control over France had been to accept a patchwork of regional and local privileges, exemptions and rights. On the eve of the Revolution, every aspect of the institutions of public life—in administration, customs and measures, the law, taxation, and the Church—was still marked by regional exceptions and privileges. Not only were the clergy, nobility, and certain corporate bodies such as guilds privileged in law and taxation, but the provinces also had their own law codes, degrees of self-government, levels of taxation, and systems of currency, weights, and measures.

In 1789–91 revolutionaries reshaped every aspect of institutional and public life according to principles of rationality, uniformity, and efficiency. Underpinning this sweeping reform was an administrative system of departments, districts, cantons, and communes. These 83 departments (today 96) were henceforth to be administered in precisely the same way; they were to have an identical structure of responsibilities, personnel, and powers. Diocesan boundaries coincided with departmental limits, and cathedrals were usually located in departmental capitals. The uniformity of administrative structures was reflected, too, in the imposition of a national system of weights, measures, and currency based on new, decimal measures. For example, the department of the Lot-et-Garonne in the southwest covered an area where before 1789 there had been sixty-five different ways of measuring length and twenty-six measures of the weight of grain: now there was just one national way of measuring. These evident benefits to business and commerce were accentuated by the abolition of tolls paid to towns and nobles and of internal customs. Before 1789, for example, a merchant taking a load of wood from Lorraine to Sète on the Mediterranean had had to pass through thirty-four separate toll-gates in twenty-one different places. Henceforth governments legislated on the basis of free trade within a national market.

From 1789, all French citizens, whatever their social background and residence, were to be judged according to a single uniform legal code, and taxed by the same obligatory proportional taxes on wealth, especially landed property. This is a key meaning of 'fraternity' and 'national unity'. The years of Revolution and Empire intensified the administrative unity of France, sustained by a new political culture of

citizenship and the celebration of national heroes drawn from antiquity or the revolutionary struggle itself. Not only was the Revolution a turning-point in the uniformity of state institutions, but, for the first time, the state was also understood as representing a more emotional entity, 'the nation', based on citizenship. It is for this reason that the French Revolution is so often seen by historians as the seed-bed of modern nationalism, a classic example of Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community' as the basis of national identity.⁸

National unity was not only achieved at the expense of privileged social orders, occupations, and localities, but also assumed that all individuals were now first and foremost French citizens, members of the new nation. Before 1789, the major form of redistribution of wealth or surplus extraction had been the payment of 'tribute' or 'surplus' of various types to the state, the Church, and seigneurs, in the form of taxes, dues, and tithes. By 1800 the claims of the privileged orders were irredeemably lost; now wealth was appropriated from its producers by the state and through economic structures (through rent, markets and labour). Now, to follow Eric Wolf's argument, the state alone could levy tribute of taxes, men, and obedience, indicating its growing power and pre-eminence as an agent of social control.⁹

The emotional power of the nation-state often led revolutionaries in Paris to claim that French alone was the 'language of liberty' and that minority languages were part of the archaic *ancien régime* which had been overthrown. In fact, popular attitudes to the Revolution among the ethnic minorities who together made up a majority of the population varied from enthusiasm to outright hostility across time and place. But the Revolution and Empire everywhere had a profound impact on collective identity, on the *francisation* ('Frenchification') of the citizens of a new society, both because of participation in elections and referenda within a national context and because, in the years of revolutionary wars, millions of young men were conscripted to fight for the *patrie*, the safety of the Revolution and the Republic. In the Year III, General Kléber asked that his Alsacien compatriot Ney accompany him in the Army of the Rhine 'so that . . . I can at least speak immediately with someone who knows my language'. Napoleon, who himself was not fully at ease in French, perhaps had them in mind when he supposedly quipped: 'let these courageous men have their Alsacien dialect; they always fight in French'.¹⁰

In his memoirs, the eminent Catalan noble Jaubert de Passa recalled nostalgically the years before 1789 when 'I was completely ignorant of the French language and ... even felt a lively enough revulsion towards it'. Two of Jaubert's close relatives had been guillotined for collaborating with the Spanish armies in 1793–4. Now, in 1830, he wrote his memoirs in perfect French.¹¹ Whether or not speakers of minority languages were enthusiastic or hostile towards revolutionary change, the years after 1789 represented an acceleration of the process of *francisisation*, whereby they came to perceive themselves as citizens of the French nation as well as Bretons, Catalans, or Basques. However, this change in self-identity should not be exaggerated. This 'double identity' was limited to an acceptance of national institutions and the vocabulary of a new, French politics. There is little evidence that popular cultures and minority languages were thereby eroded. French remained the daily language of a minority of people and France a land of great cultural and linguistic diversity.

Central to the 'minimalist' perspective on the significance of the Revolution is the argument that, as a victory of the landowning peasantry and because of the lost decades of overseas trade due to protracted warfare, these years actually retarded the development of a capitalist or market economy. Similarly, it could be argued that many of those bourgeois whom Soboul sees as the victors of the Revolution in fact suffered during it.

There were certainly many bourgeois for whom the Revolution and Empire were economically difficult periods. This was particularly the case in the great coastal towns where the uncertainties caused by wars and blockades and the temporary abolition of slavery (1794–1802) hit overseas trade hard: by 1815, French external trade was only half the 1789 volume and did not regain pre-revolutionary levels until 1830. Between 1790 and 1806, the downturn in trade caused the population of Marseilles to fall from 120,000 to 99,000, that of Nantes from perhaps 90,000 to 77,000 and that of Bordeaux from 110,000 to 92,000. In Languedoc, the textile towns of Lodève, Carcassonne, and Sommières had already been in crisis by the 1780s, largely because of English industrial competition, and the decades of war provided only temporary respite through army supplies before they went into permanent decline.

However, despite the economic difficulties felt by entrepreneurs

and merchants in such towns, there were others where the cotton, iron, and coal industries were stimulated during the Napoleonic period by France's role in the continental system and by protection from British imports. One of them was the small Norman textile town of Elbeuf. Here the manufacturing bourgeoisie had been quite specific about their grievances in their *cahier* of 1789, fulminating against:

the inefficient administration of finances . . . these constraints, these impediments to commerce: barriers reaching to the very heart of the kingdom; endless obstacles to the circulation of commodities . . . representatives of manufacturing industries and Chambers of Commerce totally ignored and despised; an indifference on the part of the government towards manufacturers . . .

The 'indifference' which so rankled with these men referred to the 1786 free trade treaty with Britain which had exposed them to cheap competition. After 1789, these budding industrialists achieved their goals, including the new recognition of their own importance: in the Year V, they were asked for the first time their opinion on a number of commercial treaties, and in the Year IX the advisory role of Chambers of Commerce was formally institutionalized. While Elbeuf felt the full brunt of trade blockades and food shortages, the decades after 1789 mark an important phase in the mechanization and concentration of the textile industry in the town rather than in rural piecework. By 1815 the population had increased some 50 per cent, and the number of enterprises had doubled. Political power was now fully concentrated in the hands of these local manufacturers.¹²

The essence of capitalism is market-oriented production by large and small entrepreneurs in town and countryside in order to make a profit. Even though many entrepreneurs, particularly in the seaports, actually suffered during the Revolution, in a more general sense, fundamental changes to the nature of the French economy were accelerated by the Revolution, changes which were to facilitate capitalist practices. From 1789 there was a series of institutional, legal, and social changes creating the environment within which capitalist industry and agriculture would thrive. The free enterprise and free trade (*laissez-faire, laissez-passer*) legislation of the Revolution guaranteed that manufacturers, farmers, and merchants could commit themselves to the market economy secure in the knowledge that they

could trade without the impediments of internal customs and tolls, differing systems of measurement, and a multitude of law codes. The position of employers was strengthened by the Le Chapelier law of June 1791, outlawing associations of workers, and by the reintroduction by Napoleon of the *livret*, an *ancien régime* practice requiring workers to carry a booklet detailing their employment record and conduct.

Economic change in the countryside may also have been accelerated by land sales. Research on the extent and social incidence of such sales during the Revolution remains piecemeal, but there is no question that it was significant in most areas. An estimate would be that about 20 per cent of land changed hands as a result of the expropriation of the Church and *émigrés*. For example, in 1786 the Thomassin family of Puiseux-Pontoise (just to the north of Menucourt) owned 3.86 hectares and rented 180 more from the seigneur, the Marquis de Girardin. They then bought up large amounts of nationalized property seized during the Revolution from the abbey of St-Martin-de-Pontoise, the Sisters of Charity and eight other ecclesiastical landowners: by 1822 they owned 150.64 hectares, 27.5 per cent of the land in the commune, including much of the marquis's estate. This land was used for commercial grain-growing and, finally, for sugar-beet and a sugar distillery.¹³

Church land in particular was usually of prime quality, sold in large lots by auction and purchased by urban and rural bourgeois—and many nobles—with the capital to thus expand pre-existing holdings. In and around Angers, for example, the extensive ecclesiastical property was auctioned on the first possible day, and the eager local bourgeoisie paid 40 per cent above its estimated value. Moreover, while most nobles kept their lands intact (Robert Forster estimates that about one-fifth of noble holdings were seized and sold), their method of exploiting the soil of necessity changed fundamentally. The final abolition of feudal dues in 1793 implied that nobles' income from property would henceforth be based on rents charged to tenants and sharecroppers or on direct exploitation of noble holdings by farm managers employing labour. Efficient use of landed resources rather than control over persons was now the basis of rural wealth.

Peasants who owned their own land were among the direct and most substantial beneficiaries of the Revolution. After the abolition of

feudal dues and the church tithe, both of which had normally been paid in grain, farmers were in a better position to concentrate on using the land for its most productive purposes. For example, in the countryside around Bayeux, the heavy, damp soils were quickly converted to cattle-raising once the Church ceased exacting a fixed tithe in grain. In Gabian, peasants started extending their vineyards into fields formerly used for growing grain. As a result of land sales, peasant holdings increased from perhaps one-third to two-fifths of the total land of France (for example, from 31 to 42 per cent in the department of the Nord studied by Georges Lefebvre), and were no longer subject to tithe or seigneurial dues. The weight of such exactions had varied enormously, but a total weight of 20–25 per cent of the produce of peasant proprietors (not to mention the *corvée*, seigneurial monopolies, and irregular payments) was common outside the west of France. Producers now retained an extra portion of their output which was often directly consumed by a better-fed population: in 1792, only one in seven of the army recruits from the impoverished mountain village of Pont-de-Montvert (Lozère) had been 1.6 metres or taller; by 1830, that was the average height of conscripts.¹⁴

The reforms and wars of the revolutionary period had disparate effects on rural economies. At the northern extremity of the country, in Montigny and its region of Cambrésis, the period saw the collapse of the distinctive rural textile economy. The free trade treaty with England in 1786 had been a body blow to the textile industry; now the revolutionary and imperial wars of 1792–1815, which swept back and forth across the region, would destroy the market for linen. When the vast church lands were sold as national property after 1790, the merchant-weavers rushed to buy them as a refuge from a collapsing industry. Consequently, by 1815 the countryside was again as rural as it had been a century earlier, and a reconstructed textile industry was centred in towns. In the southern department of the Aude, in contrast, the ending of seigneurial and church exactions, coupled with the collapse of the textile industry, encouraged peasants to turn to wine as a cash crop. Across the thirty years after 1789, the estimates provided by mayors for the area under vines in the department showed an increase of 75 per cent, from 29,300 to 51,100 hectares. The volume of wine produced may well have trebled to 900,000 hectolitres across these years.

This first viticultural revolution 'from below' is important evidence for an ongoing debate about the extent and nature of economic change wrought by the Revolution. Echoing Georges Lefebvre's famous statement that the peasantry 'destroyed the feudal regime, but consolidated the agrarian structure of France', Peter Jones has concluded that 'the desperately poor, that is to say the landless or virtually landless peasantry, nearly always demanded the complete restoration of collective rights ...' and that 'the revolution boosted the "dead weight" or subsistence sector of the rural economy'.¹⁵ The awkwardness of such an argument for a Marxist analysis of the Revolution as the decisive moment in the transformation from feudalism to capitalism has long been evident.

Certainly there is plentiful evidence of the poorest sections of rural communities clinging to collective rights as a buffer against destitution. However, the Russian historian Anatoli Ado has argued that the constraints on a more rapid transition to agrarian capitalism in post-revolutionary France came not so much from the entrenching of small peasant ownership but from the survival of large holdings rented out on restrictive short-term leases or by sharecropping. Certainly, in some areas close to cities or good transport the retention of a greater share of produce increased the safety margin for middling and larger peasant landholders and facilitated the contemplation of the risks of market specialization. In this way, too, the Revolution may have speeded up the expansion of capitalism in the countryside.¹⁶

Not all sectors of the rural population benefited equally. Napoleon could draw on extensive support from those who valued both the imposition of social order and the guaranteeing of revolutionary gains. For example, the Chartier family of Gonesse, just north of Paris, had been tenant-farmers but took advantage of the sale of church lands in 1791 to buy up a large holding. A Chartier became mayor in 1802, beginning a line that would last until 1940. Apart from those able to take advantage of the rampant inflation of 1795–7 to buy their way out of leases or to purchase land, tenants and sharecroppers experienced limited material improvements from the Revolution. However, like every other group in the rural community, they had been affected by seigneurial *banalités* (monopolies of mills, bake-houses, wine and oil presses) and *corvées* (unpaid labour) and, with rural labourers, had been those most vulnerable to the often arbitrary

justice of the seigneur's court. John Markoff's exhaustive study of the origins and course of the peasant revolution has led him to conclude that the Anglophone 'revisionists', notably Alfred Cobban, William Doyle, and George Taylor, are fundamentally incorrect in their minimizing or misreading of the extent of peasant political initiative and of the significance of the abolition of feudalism.

The direct benefits that rural people, particularly peasant landowners, drew from the Revolution were not just at the expense of the Church and nobility. In many ways the provincial towns which were centres of *ancien régime* institutions had been parasitic on the countryside. In provincial towns such as Bayeux, Dijon, and Angers, the revenue from feudal dues and tithes was expended by cathedral chapters, religious orders, and resident nobles on the employment of domestic servants, purchases from skilled trades, especially of luxury goods, and in provision of charity. As a direct result of the Revolution, the countryside largely freed itself from such control by towns, leaving marketing and administration as the remaining links. It was this which made the lot of the destitute so desperate in such towns and which caused the impoverishment of those directly or indirectly dependent on clerical and noble elites. For example, before the Revolution, the bishop of Mende in the southern Massif Central had given 10,000 livres worth of bread to the destitute each year, paid for from the tithe collected in the countryside; after 1789, the peasantry consumed that part of their produce and the town's destitute were in an even more precarious situation.

The gains for the peasantry went beyond tangible economic benefits. The abolition of seigneurialism underpinned a revolutionary change in rural social relations, voiced in political behaviour after 1789. The social authority many nobles retained in the rural community was now based on personal esteem and direct economic power over the dependent rather than on claims to deference due to a superior order of society. Nor was Napoleon's reinforcement of notables' power at the local level meekly accepted: as the prefect of the Aisne in the northeast wrote to him in 1811, 'the principles subversive of all public order which were popular during the Revolution cannot be easily erased'. In 1822, during a protracted battle with the mayor, who had inherited the noble properties at Rennes-les-Bains (department of the Aude), locals petitioned the Prefect that they

do not regard M. de Fleury as other than their mayor, who cannot have any special power, being simply responsible for the expenses of the commune according to the budget allocations, and not their former seigneur armed with feudal power, the arbitrary dispenser of the product of their sweat.¹⁷

These 'subversive principles' were commonly adduced by administrators to explain their inability to control 'the misguided greed of peasants' in seizing and clearing the vast areas of *vacants* or 'waste-lands' which became common lands during the Revolution. From this point began the *légende noire* of the peasant revolution, that the revolutionary period was an unmitigated disaster for the natural environment until the re-emergence of effective authority under Napoleon and the Restoration. There is no doubt that there was massive land clearance during the revolutionary period: in the southern department of the Aude, for example, as much as 20 per cent of the land surface may have been cleared. However, this only accelerated the environmental pressures unleashed in 1760 by Louis XV's decrees encouraging clearances. In the decades after 1750, it was estimated that some 600,000 *arpents* (about 250,000 hectares) of France was cleared, some 3 per cent of the total land area. Nor were the peasantry those who alone destroyed more forests than they planted: the loss of half the French fleet at the battle of Trafalgar was to destroy about 80,000 oak trees more than 150 years old.

Certainly, however, the Napoleonic regime permitted the forest administration to have a series of laws promulgated reorganizing its personnel and re-establishing a centralized forests policy along similar lines to that of Colbert in 1669. These laws represented a reversal of the liberalism of the early years of the Revolution, when owners of private forests had been explicitly authorized to use their resources as they wished. Forests belonging to communes were now placed under the same controls as state forests. However, in creating a centralized and enforced system of controls over forest resources, the state was to attract decades of resentment over its attempts to end the collective use of forests.

There is evidence, therefore, that the Revolution had created the institutional foundations on which capitalism could thrive. However, to what extent did it also represent the coming to power of a new class? At first glance, the continued economic prominence of the old nobility is remarkable: a major element of the 'minimalist' view of the

Revolution seems undeniable. Despite the loss of seigneurial rights and, for *émigrés*, land, nobles remained at the pinnacle of landholding, and landholding remained the major source of wealth in France. According to a survey compiled in 1802, across half of the country a majority of the wealthiest landowners were nobles, and they dominated some of the richest agricultural regions, such as the Paris basin, the valley of the Rhône, Burgundy, Picardy, Normandy, and parts of Brittany.

Nevertheless, the wealthy survivors of the landholding elite of the *ancien régime* were now only part of a far broader elite which included all of the wealthy, whatever their social background, and embraced bourgeois in agriculture, business, and administration. The rapid expansion of the bureaucracy after 1789 broke down barriers in recruitment and opened opportunities to able young bourgeois. More than in the 1780s or 1790s, the ruling class in the early nineteenth century brought together those at the pinnacle of economic, social, and political power. David Garrioch describes the Parisian bourgeoisie which emerged from the Revolution as far more powerful and self-conscious. It was an amalgam of the old parish 'notables' of the *ancien régime* and new men who had seized the opportunities which came with the selling of church lands, the availability of army contracts, and the new freedoms offered by the abolition of guilds.

Those who had taken the initiative in creating the new France after 1789 had been the bourgeoisie, whether professional, administrative, commercial, landowning, or manufacturing. For them, the Revolution represented the changes to political structures and dominant social values necessary to recognize their importance in the life of the nation. The Revolution was their triumph. The cultural values of post-revolutionary France were to be characterized by an amalgam of bourgeois and aristocratic values in a culture of 'notables'. This was reflected in a myriad of ways. For example, Paris's first restaurants or 'houses of health' pre-dated the Revolution: from the 1760s they were advertised as places to 'restore' the appetite with small portions and as providing small private spaces for intimacy. It was during the Revolution, however, that they began supplying full meals in dining-rooms for the middle classes, a function they were never to lose. The sharper articulation of a world of 'separate spheres' for men and women among the middle classes was revealed by a clearer contrast between

men's and women's clothing. The sober colours and plain design of bourgeois male attire signified the world of endeavour and seriousness; his wife's costume was to be ultra-feminine, signifying by its material the wealth of his spouse.¹⁸

Most nobles had been pragmatic enough to withdraw from public life and accept, however begrudgingly, the institutional changes of the Revolution. However, despite the continued importance of the wealthiest nobility, their losses had still been considerable. Robert Forster's judgement, though based on scattered and contrasting case-studies, is that, in real terms, an average provincial noble family's income fell from 8,000 to 5,200 francs. Seigneurial dues had represented as little as 5 per cent of noble income near Bordeaux, while immediately to the north, in Aunis and Saintonge, they amounted to 63 per cent. While many noble families survived with their lands intact, some 12,500—up to one-half of all families—lost some land, and a few lost virtually everything. Overall, perhaps one-fifth of noble land changed hands. To an extent, the losses of lands and dues were compensated for by charging higher rents to tenants and sharecroppers, but no longer could nobles avoid paying the same taxes as everyone else. Whereas 5 per cent at most of noble wealth was taken by state taxes before 1789, thereafter the uniform land tax was levied at approximately 16 per cent of the estimated annual product of the land.

Moreover, nothing could compensate the nobles for the loss of judicial rights and power—ranging from seigneurial courts to the *parlements*—or the incalculable loss of prestige and deference caused by the practice of legal equality. The *émigré* noble returned to a transformed world, of litigation by creditors and peasants, the erosion of the mystique of nobility, and the need to run an estate as a business. Lucy de La Tour du Pin, who had fled to the United States in the 1790s, looked back in 1820 on the abolition of feudalism during the Revolution. She claimed that:

This decree ruined my father-in-law and our family fortunes never recovered . . . It was a veritable orgy of iniquities . . . Since then, we have been forced to contrive a living, sometimes by sale of some of the few possessions remaining to us, sometimes by taking salaried posts . . . And so it is that, inch by inch, over a long period of years, we have gradually slid to the bottom of an abyss from which we shall not emerge in our generation.

The loss of feudal dues, rents and tolls (one of which brought in 12,000 francs per year) was enormous: the marquise estimated that her family had lost 58,000 of its original annual income of 80,000 francs.¹⁹

Even when nobles survived the Revolution with landholdings intact, their social relations with others underwent a major change. In the Provençal village of Lourmarin, Jean-Baptiste Jérôme de Bruny, a former member of the *parlement* at Aix, retained his extensive property but became the largest taxpayer, assessed for 14 per cent of all taxes payable by the community. His seigneurial dues (the *tasque* of one-eighth of harvested grain and olive oil), monopolies, and other levies were gone. The estimated annual value of his *seigneurie* had been about 16,000 livres, but by 1791 the taxable revenue from his lands was estimated at only 4,696 livres, a fall of 71 per cent. Relations between him and the village quickly became those between rich and poor citizens rather than between peasants and their lord, suggested by the speed with which locals began litigation with 'citizen Bruny' after 1789. In the decades after 1800, they fought a protracted, successful battle with Bruny over his attempts to ignore ancient collective rights in his woods: in the words of Thomas Sheppard, 'dealing not with their seigneur but simply with another French citizen'.²⁰

One reason for the enthusiasm with which Lourmarinois supported the Revolution—though they were temporarily divided during the 'Federalist' revolt of 1793—was that some 80 per cent of them were Protestants. Oral memories of earlier religious atrocities against them had been kept alive within the community. The construction of a Protestant church in 1805 was to be a tangible reminder of the significance of the Revolution for religious minorities. For revolutionaries, too, religious freedom exemplified their achievements: in a 1790 version of 'snakes and ladders', the emancipation of Jews was represented to children as one of the ladders leading to the new France. For Protestants and Jews, the legislation of 1789–91 represented legal emancipation, civil equality and the freedom to worship. Only later would some of them regret that the price of emancipation had been pressure to assimilate by subordinating their religious identity into a wider Frenchness.

The Revolution marks the end of the near-universal practice of church-going among Catholics in France. As many priests refused to accept the 1790 reforms to the Church, thousands of villages found

themselves without a priest and church education. Once war was declared in 1792, the support given by the pope to the counter-revolutionary armies made the Church an object of suspicion, even hatred, for revolutionaries. The Catholic Church was devastated during the height of the war and the Terror of 1793–4. The frequent abdications further decimated the ranks of the constitutional clergy, leaving a land almost devoid of priests; indeed, many thousands of parishes had no priest for up to a decade after 1791. Among 3,000 violent clerical deaths in these years were at least 920 clergy who were publicly executed as counter-revolutionaries, and probably 30,000–40,000 (up to 25 per cent) of all clergy had emigrated. The former First Estate was thereby affected more directly than the nobility: the number of noble *émigrés* (16,431) was about 15 per cent of the Second Estate. The adoption of revolutionary names for people and their communities may have been only temporary, but it expressed an antipathy towards the status of ecclesiastical authority which was corrosive.

In 1789, the mass of parish priests had supported the claims of the Third Estate while calling vigorously for a Catholic monopoly of worship and morality. Instead, the Catholic Church emerged from Revolution without its extensive property, internally divided between those who had accepted the Revolution and those who fled to years of exile, and with several thousand of its clergy prematurely dead. The Revolution had created a secular state; although the Restoration was to pronounce Catholicism the state religion, an important legacy of the Revolution was the creation of an ethos among public functionaries that their primary allegiance was to the ideal of a secular state which transcended particular interests. Never again could the Catholic Church claim pre-revolutionary levels of obedience or acceptance among the people. Consequently, most priests—and many of the devout—were to become implacably opposed to republicanism and secularism. Nor was it ever to regain its old monopoly of morality; for example, Napoleon continued the revolutionary abolition of laws against homosexuality, even though police continued to harass homosexuals using other charges, such as 'outraging moral decency'.

Despite this, the laity—especially women—had proved their religious commitment in large areas of the countryside; from women, too, would come a widening stream of recruits to religious orders in

the nineteenth century. The devastating impact of the French Revolution on the institutional structures of the Catholic Church and the initiative women in particular had taken in rebuilding the Church 'from below' after 1794 had developed the basis for a less authoritarian relationship of clergy and laity in the nineteenth century. In the words of a citizen from Sens to the Abbé Grégoire in January 1795:

I think it will be difficult to restrain the countryside back within the narrow boundaries of society except by giving them back their churches and the freedom to practice the religion in which they have been brought up and nourished.²¹

A reconciled Catholic Church was to be one support for the new Napoleonic regime; reinforced familial authority was to be another. The new regime's sympathy for the rights of fathers and of private property as the basis of the social order was revealed in attempts to modify revolutionary changes to the transmission of property by testament. The right of primogeniture in noble families had been abolished on 15 March 1790 as a way of undermining the economic and social power of great families. Then, in a law on inheritance passed by the National Convention on 7 March 1793, this principle was extended to all wills, requiring all children to inherit equally, extended later in the year to children born outside wedlock. The Napoleonic regime sought to modify what it saw as a threat to the authority of fathers, as well as to economically viable landed holdings. On 4 Germinal VIII (25 March 1800), a law was passed introducing a 'disposable portion' which a parent might leave to a favoured child in order to increase the inheritance. This provision was later enshrined in Napoleon's Civil Code of March 1804, which also ended the claims of children born outside marriage: henceforth they were entered in birth registers as 'born of an unknown father' and without rights to initiate claims of paternity.

However, no government—not even the Restoration—tampered with the principle of equal inheritance. If one son was now to inherit the family holding, other children had to renounce their share or be compensated in other ways. Since parents were able to transfer their property at any time, they retained an important measure of control over their offspring. But they could no longer threaten to disinherit them, for example, over the choice of a marriage partner. Whatever

the case, the social consequence of this legislation was to focus attention on children's rights as well as on the family estate, especially in Normandy and the south, where pre-revolutionary law had allowed complete testamentary freedom to parents. In countless households after 1790, the rights of daughters became a family issue—just as the divorce law empowered wives—and in this may lie the most significant shift in the status of women in these years. A study of 83 court-cases in Caen over wills contested between siblings between 1790 and 1796 shows that 45 were won by sisters. The citizeness Montfreulle stated to the court in 1795: 'I was married in 1773 "for a bouquet of roses", to use the Norman expression. That was how girls were married then. Greed was in the air and one often sacrificed the daughters for the happiness of one son.'²² Women may have emerged from the revolution with no political rights and limited legal rights, but the effects of the new inheritance law and the abolition of seigneurialism may well have meant that women were both better nourished and in a stronger position within the family. Another consequence of the legislation may have been a sudden drop in the national birth rate, from 38.8 per thousand in 1789 to 32.9 in 1804, as parents sought to limit family size and therefore the likelihood of subdivision of the family's farm.

While there is no doubt that the Revolution had entrenched political power in men's hands, this was primarily due to the unease, then anger, that scores of women's political clubs in Paris and the provinces had aroused in men. This, too, Napoleon sought to stabilize in the Civil Code of 1804. The Code was to be the cornerstone of the regime's administration of civil society and sought both to guarantee the essentials of revolutionary principles and to consolidate a social order based on wealth and patriarchy. Napoleon's authoritarian imposition of public order was, however, balanced by the rule of law and religious tolerance within a fluid social hierarchy of 'talent'. In Napoleon's words, it was 'the great glory of my reign'.

The Code was remarkable for its juxtaposition of the essentials of revolutionary principles with the consolidation of hierarchy and patriarchy. On the one hand, the code was predicated on the revolutionary assumption of a secular society of citizens equal before the law: 'talent' was seen to be the rationale of social hierarchy, and success in the use of one's individual private property was the proof of

that talent. On the other, the exercise of talent was to be the preserve of men: married women no longer had the right to independently make legal contracts. They were bound as before 1789 to the authority of fathers, then to their husbands. Henceforth wives would only sue for divorce if their husband's mistress was brought into the marital home. In contrast, a simple act of adultery by a wife sufficed for a husband to sue, and the adulterous woman was liable to imprisonment for up to two years. This ideology of patriarchal authority extended to children, for fathers were authorized to request detention for disobedient offspring for one month, if under 16 years, and six months, if aged 16 to 21.

However, despite the conservatism of the Code, no French adult alive in 1804 was in any doubt that they had lived through a revolutionary upheaval. Despite the claims of 'minimalist' historians that they were mistaken, a consideration of the social, political, and economic outcomes of the Revolution suggests that this was no illusion. Life could never be the same again. As a revolution for liberty, equality, and fraternity, it would inspire others as diverse as the leader of Latin American struggles for national independence, Simon Bolivar (who attended Napoleon's coronation in 1804), one of the early Indian nationalists of the 1830s, Ram Mohan Roy, and even the Chinese students on Tiananmen Square in 1989.

The best gauge of the Revolution's outcome is to compare the *cahiers de doléances* of 1789 with the nature of French politics and society in 1795 or 1804. Ultimately, the social changes wrought by the Revolution endured because they corresponded to some of the deepest grievances of the bourgeoisie and peasantry in their *cahiers*: popular sovereignty (even if stopping short of full democracy), civil equality, careers open to 'talent', and the abolition of the seigneurial system. Whatever the popular resentments expressed towards warfare, conscription and church reform in many regions, particularly in 1795–9, there was never a serious possibility of mass support for a return to the *ancien régime*. At the same time, the thwarted aspirations of working people by 1795, and the potency of the revolutionary tradition they had created, meant that the new regime would not be uncontested, as evidenced by the revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1870–1.

This book began in the little village of Menucourt north of Paris, and should end there. Although today Menucourt has almost been

engulfed by the suburban sprawl of Cergy-Pontoise, it was then far enough from Paris to avoid direct involvement in the upheavals in the capital. While the rest of their family emigrated, Chassepot de Beaumont and his wife stayed on in the chateau at Menucourt, accepting the loss of their seigneurial dues and prerogatives, but keeping their land intact. They were imprisoned as 'suspects' in Pontoise in late 1793, but the municipality's willingness to vouch for their good conduct was instrumental in their release shortly thereafter. Chassepot died in 1803, aged 90. Nevertheless, the Revolution had changed a great deal about life in Menucourt. Seigneurial dues were no longer paid; the expenses of the Church were funded from general taxation; no longer did the people of Menucourt pay a tithe to a priory at Évecquemont. However, while this had been a revolution for civil equality it had not fundamentally altered the vulnerable position of the wage-earning majority of the population. As before 1789, most of Menucourt's households survived from work as farm-labourers, and by quarrying, woodcutting, and tilling small plots. In the words of three of their descendents, who wrote the village history for the bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989, 'The labourers would have to wait nearly two centuries and live through other revolutions—political, industrial and, above all, cultural—for inequalities to be significantly reduced and for liberty to become meaningful.'²³

Notes

1. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (London, 1971), 127.
2. François Furet, *The French Revolution 1774–1884* (Oxford, 1992).
3. Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside 1846–1852* (Oxford, 1992), 161.
4. Between 300 and 500 of Luc's 2,320 people were killed in all the fighting during the Vendéen insurrection: Jean-Clément Martin and Xavier Lardière, *Le Massacre des Lucs-Vendée 1794* (Vouillé, 1992). On Chanzeaux, see Lawrence Wylie, *Chanzeaux: A Village in Anjou* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966). On La Roche-sur-Yon, see John M. Merriman, *The Margins of City Life: Explorations on the French Urban Frontier, 1815–1851* (Oxford, 1991), 101–12.
5. *La Feuille du salut public*, November 1793. On women's participation in the Revolution, see Rose, *Tribunes and Amazons*; Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere*, ch. 6, Conclusion; Hufton, *The Prospect before Her*, ch. 12.